Numbers and counters

Oboeru 覚える

Japanese counts differently depending on what is being counted, and the number itself changes sound when it meets the counter. These are the ones you meet in a shop, a station or a café.

One to ten, two ways

Number	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Counting out loud	一 ichi	二 ni	三 san	四 yon / shi	五 go	六 roku	七 nana / shichi	八 hachi	九 kyuu / ku	十 juu
Things, any shape	一つ hitotsu	二つ futatsu	三つ mittsu	四つ yottsu	五つ itsutsu	六つ muttsu	七つ nanatsu	八つ yattsu	九つ kokonotsu	十 too

Above ten, only the first row is used: 十一 *juu-ichi*, 二十 *ni-juu*, 百 *hyaku, 100*, 千 *sen, 1,000*, 一万 *ichi-man, 10,000*.

Counters: the sound changes are the whole difficulty

Counter	Used for	1	2	3	6	8	10	How many?
人	people	**ひとり**	**ふたり**	さんにん	ろくにん	はちにん	じゅうにん	何人 nannin
枚	flat things — tickets, paper, shirts	いちまい	にまい	さんまい	ろくまい	はちまい	じゅうまい	何枚 nanmai
本	long things — bottles, pens, trains	**いっぽん**	にほん	**さんぼん**	**ろっぽん**	**はっぽん**	**じゅっぽん**	何本 nanbon
匹	small animals	**いっぴき**	にひき	**さんびき**	**ろっぴき**	**はっぴき**	**じゅっぴき**	何匹 nanbiki
冊	books, notebooks	**いっさつ**	にさつ	さんさつ	ろくさつ	**はっさつ**	**じゅっさつ**	何冊 nansatsu
台	machines — cars, computers	いちだい	にだい	さんだい	ろくだい	はちだい	じゅうだい	何台 nandai
回	times, occasions	**いっかい**	にかい	さんかい	**ろっかい**	**はっかい**	**じゅっかい**	何回 nankai
歳	age	**いっさい**	にさい	さんさい	ろくさい	**はっさい**	**じゅっさい**	何歳 nansai

Highlighted readings are the ones that change sound. The pattern repeats: 1, 6, 8 and 10 tighten the sound before か・さ・は counters, and 3 makes an は counter voiced (ほん → ぼん).

Use it

〜をください two, please — 二つください

いくつですか how many? — みかんはいくつですか

何人ですか how many people? — 何人ですか

いくらですか how much? — これはいくらですか

〜歳です I'm … years old — 二十歳です

〜回 … times a week — 週に三回

Watch out

Four people is よにん, not よんにん. Seven people is しちにん or ななにん.

Twenty years old is はたち, a word of its own — にじゅっさい is understood but sounds odd.

One and two people are special. ひとり・ふたり come from the second row; from three on, people use the first row.

Two things you get free

When you are stuck, use 〜つ. It works for most everyday objects up to ten and no one will correct you.

Asking uses the same word. Put 何 in front of any counter — 何枚・何台・何回 — and you have the question.

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